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Assessing Student Progress toward the “Equipped for the Future” Standards: Issues and Lessons to Date

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Abstract: *Equipped for the Future (EFF), the national standards-based system reform initiative for adult education, has developed sixteen content standards that define the core knowledge and skills adults need to effectively carry out their primary roles. The current stage of EFF research is focused on development of performance standards for these content standards. This roundtable will discuss issues and findings from this field-based research.*

Equipped for the Future (EFF) is developing a framework for assessing performance of the EFF Content Standards. Research and development tasks include defining the key dimensions of a continuum of performance; developing a continuum of performance for each standard; identifying appropriate tools to assess performance of each standard; and developing a broad qualifications framework that focuses on integrated performance across standards (Stein, 2000).

Identifying Key Dimensions of Performance

EFF standards were developed for all adults, from those with very few years of formal education and low English literacy skills to adults with many years of formal education and advanced degrees. A continuum of performance, then, for the EFF standards is one that does not isolate adult literacy students on a special, developmental continuum separated from movement along the mainstream path to mastery. To identify a theory-based set of dimensions of performance that meets this criteria, the EFF development team reviewed other frameworks that have attempted to define a broad continuum of performance, including the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) and the qualifications frameworks from Australia, England, Scotland, South Africa and New Zealand; data from EFF field development sites, 1997-99; and cognitive science on expertise and transfer. Four dimensions of performance were identified as useful in describing and discriminating between performances at points along a continuum from beginner to expert: depth and breadth of the

knowledge base; fluency and ease of performance; independence of performance; range of conditions for performance.

Developing a Continuum of Performance for each EFF Standard

Currently, practitioners in fifteen adult basic education programs in five states are engaged in detailed observation of student performance toward the EFF standards, using the Performance Framework for EFF Standards (Figure 1) and an accompanying template. In the Performance Framework, the four dimensions are embedded in categories reflecting how teachers think about planning and instruction: Task, Context, Knowledge Base, and Performance. These categories are framed as questions similar to those found in an observation rubric so that they are more immediately useful for planning instruction, teaching and evaluating as well as for detailed documentation of these activities.

Using a template with generic descriptors for five ranges of performance, descriptions of skill development and application are placed at points along the continuum for each standard. Preliminary results will be shared during the roundtable. Final results will be level descriptors and benchmarks for each of the 16 standards.

The issues already identified in this step of developing a national assessment framework are complex, in both practical and theoretical ways.

- What kinds and combinations of tools will be useful to practitioners in documenting and assessing adult performance?

- How can in-class assessments be linked to external measures of competence?
- How do we define levels of performance that are not based solely on academic conceptions

of beginning, proficient, and expert (or on K-12 grade levels) but that are anchored in

Figure 1

Performance Framework for EFF Standards In order to insure that adult learners can use the EFF skills to act flexibly, with a range of options and choices, to meet the goals in their lives, teachers and learners need to pay attention to the following aspects of learner performance:			
What kinds of tasks can learners carry out? 1. How complex is the task for the learner? 2. How familiar are learners with the task?	In what contexts can learners perform? 1. How familiar are learners with the context? 2. In how many different situations can learners perform? 3. How much risk is involved in the situation? How high are the stakes?	What do learners know? 1. Do learners have vocabulary related to the skill? Related to the subject area? 2. Do learners have content knowledge related to the skill? Related to the subject area? 3. Do learners have strategies for organizing content knowledge?	How well can learners perform? 1. How fluently can learners perform? <i>How much effort is required?</i> <i>How consistently do learners start and finish, getting to the desired outcome?</i> <i>How well are barriers controlled or overcome?</i> 2. How independently can learners perform? <i>How much help is needed from others?</i> <i>How much initiative is shown in getting started?</i> <i>How often do learners generate their own strategies to complete tasks?</i>

external benchmarks related to what an adult needs to know and be able to do to accomplish real life goals?

By addressing these questions, Equipped for the Future seeks to assist the field in expanding what can be measured, so that adult literacy and basic education programs can demonstrate how they systematically contribute to achieving the results

that matter to adults as family members, workers, and community members.

References

Stein, S. (2000). *The Equipped for the Future content standards: What adults need to know and be able to do in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.